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КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

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и културолошки истражувања

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## TRUE TO LIFE? SOME REMARKS ON A DUTCH TRANSLATION OF JERZY KOSINSKI'S *THE PAINTED BIRD*

**Antony Hoyte-West**

Independent scholar, United Kingdom

[antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com](mailto:antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Almost six decades after it was first published, the novel *The Painted Bird*, by the Polish-American author Jerzy Kosinski, continues to attract interest and controversy. The book was widely translated and an analytical comparison of its translation into over a dozen languages was recently published. Noting the absence of Dutch from this analysis, the present contribution aims to provide an overview of *De geveerde vogel*, the Dutch translation of *The Painted Bird*. In the first instance, information regarding the circumstances and development of Kosinski's original novel are outlined. This is subsequently complemented by an overview of the Dutch language as well as the context behind the translation of the book, before relevant aspects relating to the original and the Dutch translation are compared and contrasted.

**Keywords:** *Jerzy Kosinski; The Painted Bird; De geveerde vogel; Holocaust literature; literary translation; Oscar Timmers.*

### **Introduction: Jerzy Kosinski and *The Painted Bird***

Despite the enduring controversy over its accuracy and authorship, *The Painted Bird* is one of the most well-known novels about the Holocaust era. Originally published in 1965, the events of the novel, which takes place in a nameless Central European country during the Second World War, were largely believed to have been based on the real-life experiences of the work's author, the Polish-American writer Jerzy Kosinski. The book was instantly hailed as a literary classic and was endorsed by Elie Wiesel, among other luminaries (Franklin 2017). In recent times, *The Painted Bird* has found a new audience through the 2019 release of a feature film by the Czech director Václav Marhoul. This adaptation was critically acclaimed in the media (for example, see Brooks, 2019; Lodge, 2019; Morgenstern, 2020), though its violence and graphic nature were commented on. In addition, Marhoul's (2019) motion picture is also notable for its pioneering use of Interslavic, an artificially constructed language incorporating elements of all of the most widely-spoken Slavic languages (Merunka, 2018), thus providing a linguistic reflection of the nameless locale where Kosinski chose to set his novel.

Born to a Jewish family in Poland in 1933, Kosinski emigrated to the United States after the war, achieving considerable celebrity – not to mention material success – as a writer, university professor, and general man of letters. Despite

his meteoric rise to prominence, the publication of a highly favourable article in *The New York Times* (Gelb, 1982) precipitated a more critical examination of the man and his work. As also observed by Rokosz (2022), this led to allegations of plagiarism and dishonesty regarding not only the veracity of the supposedly autobiographical events portrayed in *The Painted Bird* and Kosinski's other writings, but also concerning whether Kosinski had written these books entirely unaided. The latter allegation was particularly strong, given that Kosinski, like his earlier compatriot Joseph Conrad, had elected to write in English, a foreign language that he had only acquired as an adult. As such, Kosinski's literary and personal reputation never really recovered from the controversy, and this was arguably a factor contributing to his suicide in 1991 (Franklin, 2017).

As noted by Corngold (1973), language and culture play a vastly important role in *The Painted Bird*. Indeed, although the native language of the principal protagonist is never revealed, the reader learns that his cultured urban speech distinguishes him from the uneducated dialect spoken by the peasants (Corngold, 1973, p. 154). In addition, the main character also loses the power of speech, thus becoming mute; a fate allegedly suffered by Kosinski as well, though the author was to state that he regained his verbal fluency following a skiing accident as a teenager (Gelb, 1982).

Given that linguistic and cultural aspects infuse the novel's events to a significant degree, the main focus of this contribution builds on a recent publication which compares and contrasts the translations of *The Painted Bird* from English into a range of tongues (Harmon, 2022a). Using examples from a range of different languages, that study explores the portrayals of certain events and themes in the novel through the prism of translation, seeking to analyse the differences between the translations from English into the languages of the so-called "involved" cultures – that is, for example, German, Polish, and Russian – with those translations into "detached" languages – i.e., from those countries not directly portrayed in the novel's events. Though this project is notable for its aims and scope, Dutch did not feature among the languages chosen for analysis. Therefore, the present contribution aims to provide a brief summary of *The Painted Bird*'s Dutch translation within the relevant context, outlining relevant aspects and providing some pointers for further discussion.

### **Contextualising the Dutch translation of *The Painted Bird***

The Dutch language is a member of the western branch of the Germanic family of languages and is generally held to be the major language that is the closest relative to modern English. Dutch is an official language of The Netherlands and Belgium; in the latter country, it is spoken natively in Flanders and enjoys bilingual status (with French) in the city of Brussels. In addition to being one of the 24 official and working languages of the European Union (European Union, 2022), Dutch is also an international language; it holds official status in Suriname and the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, and St Martin. There are also vestiges of the language remaining in Indonesia, a former Dutch colony, as well as previously in South Africa, although there has now been superseded by



Afrikaans, a related “daughter” language with which it still shares a high degree of mutual intelligibility (Kooij and Booij, 2018, pp. 112–113).

As Steurs (2021) notes in her recent examination of this topic, the status of a language is dependent on many different factors. Despite having fewer than 25 million native speakers, as the language of a former colonial power Dutch has a considerable geographical spread and historical importance which goes back to the early modern era. In terms of language policy, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Suriname are members of the De Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union) an organisation which is responsible for developing and promulgating relevant linguistic policy and practices across the Dutch-speaking world (Taalunie, 2022).

Due to their geographical, linguistic, and cultural proximity to the United Kingdom, both The Netherlands and Dutch-speaking Belgium have had a long history of language contact with English. In addition to the close linguistic relationship between Dutch and English, the wide availability of English-language media, combined with the quality and widespread availability of English-language tuition in the domestic education systems, has led to a very high degree of English-language proficiency. This has been commented on both in academic studies (for example, see van Essen, 1997; Wilkinson, 2012; Rosiers and Vogl, 2019), as well as in the wider media (e.g., Holligan, 2018).

Furthermore, as noted by McMartin (2020), translation plays an important role in the Dutch-language publishing world, although most research (for example, see van Es and Heilbron, 2015, etc.) has focused on translations of Dutch literature into major world languages such as English. Following relevant sociological analyses of the circulation of literature, as Brems, Feldmann, Réthelyi and Van Kalmthout (2020, p. 125) observe in the introduction to their examination of the opposite phenomenon (i.e., the transnational trajectories of Dutch-language literary works), in terms of broader notions regarding the circulation of world literature the Dutch-speaking market is generally viewed a net recipient rather than exporter of translated works. Indeed, there is a buoyant literary translation market in both countries, which in The Netherlands is supported largely by the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds, 2022), and in Belgium by Flanders Literature (2022). In addition, a dedicated centre for literary translation – the Expertisecentrum voor Literair Vertalen (ELV) – offers professional support and development, including regular workshops for literary translators working into and out of Dutch (ELV, 2022).

In the case of *The Painted Bird*, two Dutch translations have been published to date, both of which appeared with publishers based in The Netherlands. The first version of *De geveerde vogel* appeared in 1966, a year after Kosinski's original English novel was released. Published by De Bezige Bij, a major Amsterdam-based publishing house, it was translated by Mischa de Vreede (1936–2020), an author, poet, and translator born in the Dutch East Indies (de Vreede, 2021). The second translation of *De geveerde vogel*, which is the subject of this brief overview, appeared in 1979. Also published by De Bezige Bij, this translation was the work of Oscar Timmers (1931–2018), a noted author and editor who also translated Kosinski's other works into Dutch. This second translation was

rereleased in a new edition in 2014 and was subsequently reviewed in the Dutch press (Heerma van Voss, 2014). Indeed, media coverage of the new edition of Timmers' translation led to the erroneous assumption that it was the sole existing translation of *The Painted Bird* into Dutch, an error that was quickly corrected by de Vreede herself (de Vreede, 2014).

In addition to providing an analysis of the interpretative potential of literary translation, the aim of the present study is to examine the hypothesis that translation into the language of an involved culture – that is, a culture present in a given work – has its own specificity of a manipulative nature, which differs from domestication as posited by Venuti (1995). Within this approach, it is important to define the notion of an “involved” culture. Although Dutch-speaking Europe suffered greatly under Nazi occupation during the Second World War (as exemplified in Bart van Es's Costa Prize-winning memoir cataloguing the experiences of his family during that time (van Es, 2018)), and even though Anne Frank's famous diary (Frank, 2019 [1952]), the world's best-known work of Holocaust literature, was written in Amsterdam, for the purposes of this wider research project neither The Netherlands nor Belgium can be considered “involved” cultures. Rather, as delineated by Harmon (2022b), the usage of the term in the present contribution denotes those Central and East European cultures featured, whether directly or not, in the plot and characterisation of *The Painted Bird*. Hence, the Dutch translation belongs squarely to those versions regarded as representative of “detached” cultures (Harmon, 2022b).

The focus of the current study relies on analysing the second translation of *De geveerde vogel*; that is, the one by Oscar Timmers. The version used is the eleventh impression (from 2008) of the 1979 first edition. In particular, the faithfulness of the Dutch translation to the English original will be analysed, examining if there are any significant differences between the two. In addition, terms referring to geographical settings and people will be scrutinised, to see how they are incorporated into the translated text. At the outset, though, it is important to note that this particular analysis is subject to certain limitations. These include the fact that, due to logistical challenges, only one of the two extant translations into Dutch was analysed. In addition, the study has been conducted by a native English-speaking researcher and translator with Dutch as a source language, which may mean that subtle nuances apparent to the native Dutch speaker may not be as evident. Nonetheless, given the linguistic similarities between English and Dutch, and also given the status of their respective cultures as not “involved” in the action of *The Painted Bird*, it is to be hoped that the findings here will be useful with regard to verifying the abovementioned hypothesis.

### **An overview of strategies and techniques utilised in translating *The Painted Bird* into Dutch**

Regarding the role of translations, in citing the assertion when investigating global literary circulation that translations are worthy of particular focus “not only because they are an important methodological aid but also because they are a valuable object of study in their own right” (Brems, Feldmann, Réthelyi and Van

Kalmthout, 2020, p. 127), this section aims to outline briefly certain strategies and techniques used by the Dutch translator of *The Painted Bird*. For the purposes of this research, given that a general notion of literary translation can be argued to be the “creat[ion of] a text concurring with the original in all possible respects” (Harmon, 2019, p. 14), the following preliminary analysis illustrates that the Dutch version remains extremely close to the English source text. As such, with regard to omissions, additions, and semantic changes, a preliminary comparison of Kosinski’s original with Timmers’ translation yields only very minor differences. For example, at the opening of the novel, where the narrator is sent “to the shelter of a distant village” (Kosinski, 1978 [1965], p. 3), the translation reads “naar een afgelegen, rustig dorp” (Kosinski, 2008 [1979], p. 33); that is, to a distant, quiet village. Similarly, in Chapter 9 of the novel, the furnaces of the concentration camps are described as having “engines more powerful than those of the largest locomotives” (Kosinski, 1978 [1965], p. 97), whereas in the Dutch version this is rendered as “machines de sterker waren dan de grootste locomotief” (Kosinski, 2008 [1979], p. 136); that is, machinery that was stronger than the largest locomotive. Finally, in Chapter 16 of the work, “the Soviet world” (Kosinski, 1978 [1965], p. 192) is translated as “de Sovjetmaatschappij” (Kosinski, 2008 [1979], p. 245); that is, the Soviet society.

As such, when compared to certain other translations of *The Painted Bird* the Dutch rendering remains extremely close to the original work - for example, the German version of the novel omits pointed commentaries regarding the Nazis and their ideology which are present in the English source text (Harmon, 2022c). However, as illustrated above, small additions and amendments are present in the translated Dutch version. Although they do not fundamentally alter the meaning of the sentences, they do represent a conscious decision taken by the translator to deviate from the English original. In the absence of a translator’s note, it is impossible to examine the rationale in greater detail; however, given the nature of the changes (e.g. from plural to singular, or the addition/ omission of an extra adjective) it can be hazarded that these amendments may have been done for largely stylistic reasons – i.e. to improve the “flow” of the text in Dutch, and thus making the work more appealing for the Dutch reader. Building on this concept, in terms of the general tenor of the narrative, the economical tone of the original is maintained in Timmers’ translation. A reason for this may be the linguistic similarities between Dutch and English, as highlighted in the previous section, which mean that the closeness between the two languages also transfers well in stylistic terms. The same is true regarding the numerous and graphic portrayals of cruelty that are depicted in the novel, which have not been softened or made more hard-hitting for the Dutch reading public.

Turning to the nameless Central European country where the plot of *The Painted Bird* takes place, the Dutch translation adheres to the original version and makes no explicit references to any one nation. This is unlike in certain other versions – for example, in the case of the translation into German (Harmon, 2022c) – where evidently a clear translation decision was taken to identify the country where the novel’s action takes place as “Poland.” The local populace, who are

usually referred to as “peasants” in Kosinski’s original text, are called “boeren” in the Dutch translation. At this juncture, it is worth noting that the Dutch word can have a broader meaning than the English original and is perhaps more commonly rendered into English as “farmer”; however, the term “boer” can also be used in a pejorative sense, for an uncultured and uneducated person, in a similar vein to the use of the word “peasant” as an insult in English (for more information, see van Dale, 2022).

With regard to names present in the source text which refer to geographical, ethnic, or religious origin (for instance, Germans, Gypsies, or Jews), these terms are faithfully rendered in the Dutch translation (as “Duitsers”, “zigeuners”, or “joden”). Proper names, too, are largely maintained from the English original in an unchanged form. As an aside, it is interesting to note that the Dutch version also retains the unusual spelling of the name Lekh which appears in the original English version; a reader familiar with Polish language and culture might expect the spelling of “Lech”. In fact, the only differences in nomenclature in Timmers’ translation arise with regard to Dutch-language norms concerning the transliteration of certain Russian names. For example, Yury (Kosinski, 1978 [1965], p. 208) is rendered as “Joeri” (Kosinski, 2008 [1979], p. 264) and an allusion to the author Maxim Gorky (Kosinski, 1978 [1965], p. 186), can be found as “Maxim Gorki” in the Dutch version (Kosinski, 2008 [1979], p. 239). Some characters in the novel are known only by their nicknames; these too, such as “Rainbow” and “The Silent One” are also faithfully translated into Dutch as “Regenboog” and “De Zwijger” respectively.

### **Concluding remarks and pointers for further research**

This brief overview of Oscar Timmers’ translation of *The Painted Bird* into Dutch has illustrated that, as the language of one of the cultures not involved in the work’s action or setting, the translation remains extremely faithful to Kosinski’s English original. This is especially so when compared with the analyses of translations into Norwegian (Kapranov, 2022) and Romanian (Sinu, 2022) respectively, which despite also being “detached” cultures display significant deviations from the original English source text. In the Dutch translation of *The Painted Bird*, any amendments – where noted – are minor and do not change the overall impression created; in addition, Kosinski’s style transfers well between Dutch and English. Names, be they personal or demonyms, are translated faithfully into Dutch, with the transliteration of certain names the only distinguishing factor between the original and the translation. This fidelity can be attributed not only to the linguistic closeness between English and Dutch but also to the close cultural links between English-speaking and Dutch-speaking Europe. This reality nonetheless is distinct from the nameless Central European milieu portrayed in the pages of *The Painted Bird*.

In terms of suggestions for further discussion and research, a useful starting point could be to compare Oscar Timmers’ translation with the earlier translation by Mischa de Vreede. Though as mentioned previously this was impossible due to extenuating circumstances, it could provide more in-depth insights regarding the translation techniques and strategies utilised in rendering the novel into Dutch.

In addition, analysis of the Dutch version of the subtitles of Marhoul's 2019 film may also prove interesting material for further comparative research on the topic. Hence, it can be stated with certainty that in Timmers' Dutch translation of *The Painted Bird*, the culture-specific manipulations often found in other translations into the languages of the "involved" cultures are simply not present. As such, mindful of the notion that literary translation is always an interpretative act, it can be stated that *De geveerde vogel* remains an accurate and faithful translation of the original English-language work, thereby allowing native speakers of Dutch the chance to experience Kosinski's novel in their own language.

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